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School Choice: Evidence and Recommendations





School Choice and Accountability

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Executive Summary

This policy brief explores the intersection of school choice and accountability. Based on a review of research since 1970, we first develop a typology of four distinct models of accountability: *bureaucratic*, *performance*, *market* and *professional*. We both define these and demonstrate how they are embedded in the school choice movement. Second, we examine several school choice options—vouchers and tax credits, charter schools, virtual/cyber schools, home schools and inter- and intradistrict choice—and detail the varied accountability systems inherent in each. Third, we explore the impact of school choice programs on the accountability of traditional district schools. Finally, we provide four practical recommendations for policymakers and other interested parties:

- Consider school accountability as something more than testing performance or providing information for parents-as-consumers—the emphases reflected in the current prevalence of performance- and market-based systems. Instead, shape accountability systems to examine whether schools are directly contributing to the greater societal good.
- When creating or judging school choice policies, consider local context. Choice policies and accountability systems vary widely across the US and from one community or locale to another.
- Consider employing different types of accountability at different levels and in different combinations to hedge risk. Accountability systems that rely on a single accountability mechanism are susceptible to inefficiencies or inequities.
- When evaluating accountability systems, rely on empirical research. Possible future studies investigating the effects of various combinations of accountability types may be particularly useful.

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Overview

Accountability, a term used extensively in the popular press and educational reform literature, is a fundamental principle of the school choice movement. However, the concept of accountability appears analogous to a Rorschach test: everyone sees something slightly different in the details. Educational researchers have long noted the lack of commonly defined terminology in the modern school choice and accountability movement, which dates from 1970. As early as 1974, Levin called attention to “the great diversity in the use of the word accountability.”¹ Thus, our first task in this study was to review nearly four decades of research (1970-2007) and to distill it into a typology of four distinct accountability models: *bureaucratic*, *performance*, *market* and *professional*. In early segments of this brief, we define these forms, explore their evolution, and demonstrate how they are embedded in the school choice movement.

Having detailed the typology, we then move to examining the varied accountability systems inherent in several popular school choice options: vouchers and tax credits, charter schools, virtual/cyber schools, home schools and inter- and intradistrict choice. After considering the impact of choice programs and their attendant accountability systems on traditional district schools, we close by offering four practical recommendations for policymakers developing school choice accountability frameworks.

Clarifying Accountability: A Typology

In 1975, Browder completed an extensive review of existing accountability literature and concluded:

1. There were no commonly agreed upon definitions.
2. Accountability needed conceptual refinement. With no common framework, confusion abounded among such terms as *general accountability*, *institutional accountability* and *technological accountability*.
3. Accountability had become highly politicized. Various groups who might be held accountable attacked the concept and pounced on malfunctions in order to discredit it.²

Throughout recent decades, many researchers aware of these issues have attempted to more precisely define forms of accountability—producing still more

diversity. In a 1974 effort, for example, Levin identified four strands of accountability: (a) performance reporting, (b) technical process, (c) political process, and (d) institutional process.³ In 1986, Kogan presented three education accountability models: (a) state or public control, (b) professional control, and (c) consumer control.⁴ Two years later, Darling-Hammond posited five models of accountability: (a) political, (b) legal, (c) bureaucratic, (d) professional, and (e) market.⁵ And in 1990, Kirst recognized six types of educational accountability: (a) performance reporting, (b) monitoring and compliance with standards or regulations, (c) incentive systems, (d) reliance on the market, (e) changing the locus of control, and (f) changing professional roles.⁶ Our detailed review of these models uncovered substantive overlap, however, allowing us to synthesize them into four main types of accountability: bureaucratic, performance, market and professional.⁷ These four conceptions have appeared repeatedly in the school choice literature over the past 37 years and provide a useful lens for exploring the school choice movement.

Bureaucratic Accountability. Kirst described bureaucratic accountability as “monitoring and compliance with standards and regulations. . . . [with the] key accountability criterion [being] procedural compliance. Prominent examples include individualized education plans (IEPs) for handicapped children and targeting funds under Chapter 1 programs.”⁸ Darling-Hammond understood bureaucratic accountability as being embodied in “agencies of government which promulgate rules and regulations intended to assure citizens that public functions will be carried out in pursuit of public goals voiced through democratic or legal processes.”⁹ Cuban, however, underscored that an emphasis on meeting procedural requirements might not align with an emphasis on meeting the needs of students.¹⁰ Because standards and regulations are often subject to legal challenge, the emphasis on compliance has resulted in the courts substantively shaping accountability requirements in bureaucratic accountability systems.

Performance Accountability. Rather than procedure, performance accountability is concerned with outcomes, with how schools and students perform. Levin’s definition is “a periodic report of the attainments of schools and other educational units.”¹¹ Kirst details the concept this way:

Performance reporting includes such measurement techniques as statewide assessment, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), school report cards, and performance indicators, and it has some similarities to the audit report in business. In essence, performance reports assume that information per se will stimulate actions to improve education. . . . Also, state performance reporting can be used to monitor regulatory compliance for such state requirements as minimum graduation requirements. . . . This technique can be used to produce rewards as well as sanctions.¹²

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The Federal Office of Educational Research and Improvement has defined performance accountability as “a set of indicators or statistics that provides information about how well schools are performing.”¹³ The current policy environment is dominated by performance accountability as brought on by federal and state mandates.

Market Accountability. According to Kirst, “[market] accountability occurs when consumers choose between schools, with the bad schools presumably closing if the pupils leave,” although he cautioned that “choice restricted to the public sector may not be a powerful accountability device.”¹⁴ Darling-Hammond notes that in market accountability system,

governments may choose to allow clients or consumers to choose what services best meet their needs; to preserve the utility of this form of accountability, government regulations seek to prevent monopolies, protect freedom of choice, and require that service providers give truthful information.¹⁵

Chubb and Moe, however, argued for redefining terms in the market place accountability model by maintaining that public schools are essentially a monopoly.¹⁶ Students, they said, are forced into the local district school and enroll regardless of performance levels. They held that, in contrast, marketplace accountability must allow parents to choose among public and private schools, forcing schools to compete for students.

Professional Accountability. In professional accountability, experts in practice assume responsibility for setting and meeting standards of practice. According to Rivera,

In this model, teachers as professionals (assuming competence and knowledge) are obligated to make decisions in a responsible manner and adhere to standards of professional practice. The process of peer review for tenure and dismissal . . . is considered a professional accountability mechanism.¹⁷

Firestone and Bader offer a similar description:

Professionals are keepers of important values . . . only they have the knowledge to determine if those values are being adequately met. From this perspective educators must show the value of their work to other educators, not to the public.¹⁸

Several common policies reflect this model of accountability, including, Kirst noted, “school accreditation, teacher-controlled boards for initial licensing of graduates from university teacher education programs and policies to devolve policy decisions to teacher led school site councils.”¹⁹

Systemic Interactions. Each of the four accountability models has particular strengths and weaknesses. As Kirst noted, they are not mutually exclusive, so that implementing multiple types simultaneously might compensate for the limitations of individual types.²⁰ Conversely, however, Kirp suggested that various models frequently conflict when they occur within the same accountability system:

Professionalism, legalism, bureaucratization, and politicization pull and tug against one another. . . . problems arise when one or another framework becomes too powerful—for instance, when legalism engulfs in procedural snarls questions that may either be unresolvable or better resolved less formally, when professionals deprive parents of effective voice in decisions concerning their children, or when bureaucratic rules undermine the exercise of wise professional discretion. Policy remedies take the form of redressing the balance among these frameworks.²¹

With the awareness that combinations of accountability models may work synergistically or antagonistically in practice, we turn next to examining accountability across the spectrum of school choice programs.

Accountability in Popular School Choice Programs

The following discussion examines accountability types implicit in popular school choice programs: vouchers and tax credits; charter schools; virtual or cyber schools; home schools; interdistrict choice; and, intradistrict choice.

Vouchers and Tax Credits

In the 1950s, economist Milton Friedman first endorsed offering parents vouchers, funded by taxes, which they could use to send their children to any school.²² He reasoned, as do many contemporary supporters, that school vouchers would create competition among schools for students, forcing schools to improve their services. However, the move from this theory to practice has uncovered significant implementation challenges. For example, it has proven difficult to determine an adequate and fair voucher amount because per-pupil costs vary significantly across and within private and public schools.

Support for taxpayer-financed vouchers remains relatively weak overall.²³ There are a dozen publicly-funded voucher plans currently in practice, and most of them limit participation to specific populations.²⁴ The eligibility criteria typically include such factors as family income, disability, or area of residence. Five states have voucher programs for students with disabilities. Ohio and Arizona have separate programs for students with autism and students in foster care, respectively.

Milwaukee, Cleveland and Washington DC are home to the most notable examples of publicly funded voucher programs. All three target low-income

families. In 2005-2006 Milwaukee's voucher plan provided \$6,501 to 17,410 students. In that same year the D.C. plan issued \$7,500 vouchers to 1,802 students.²⁵ The Utah legislature passed a voucher program of \$3,000 per student in 2007, but it was later repealed in a statewide referendum. In 2006 the Florida Supreme Court struck down the fledgling Opportunity Scholarship Program.

Privately funded voucher programs are more prevalent than taxpayer-funded plans. Examples include Milwaukee's Partners Advancing Values in Education, the Educational Choice Charitable Trust in Indianapolis, the New York City School Choice Scholarships Foundation, and the Washington D.C. Scholarship Fund.²⁶ These programs typically operate in large city districts and are often sponsored by mayoral offices, private or religious organizations, or corporations. The monies are raised privately and distributed in most cases to economically needy families seeking non-secular school choice options. The programs are thus targeted and limited in scope, much like the existing publicly funded voucher programs.

Tax credit programs operate very similarly to school vouchers. Under tax credit programs, education-related expenses are reimbursed through tax relief. Tax credits can be designed for individuals, parents or corporations, reimbursing them for education expenses or contributions to public schools or school tuition organizations.²⁷ Seven states currently support some form of tax credit program.²⁸

In theory, school voucher and tax credit programs fall most directly under market accountability. In practice, however, vouchers can be highly regulated, invoking bureaucratic accountability that distances them from Friedman's free market conceptualization. Eligibility rules for low-income students or students with disabilities, caps on total student participation and voucher amounts, and other considerations suggest that these programs operate in quasi-markets. Vouchers for students attending public schools are subject to the same performance accountability standards required of those schools. Voucher programs that support enrollment at non-secular schools are not influenced by performance accountability to the same extent.

Regulated voucher plans provide for some degree of the consumer-driven competition that market accountability intends to generate, since schools may compete for students' tuition dollars. However, the bureaucratic accountability embedded in voucher plan regulations is often a contested element. Voucher detractors believe that bureaucratic rules are necessary to provide a fair choice system and to ensure appropriate use of public funds. Voucher proponents, on the other hand, argue that many of the bureaucratic rules simply serve as undue protection for monopolistic public schools and that such over-regulated environments are at odds with free market competition.

Free-market accountability, where an invisible hand weeds out poor quality schools and rewards high quality schools, does not appear to operate in the public-private school system in the current context. Vouchers have not been fully operational outside of a handful of programs that, for the most part, target low-income families. From an accountability perspective, bureaucratic forces are operating within the education marketplace.

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Tax credits, however, seem less susceptible to bureaucratic influence than voucher programs. They arguably provide “the most indirect path of public money to private schools.” As a result, suggest Huerta et al., “policymakers may feel less inclined to impose state regulations on private schools that enroll tax credit beneficiaries than on voucher recipients.”²⁹

Charter Schools

A charter school is a publicly funded alternative to traditional district schools. Charters involve a contract between a district and the charter’s organizer/s. In exchange for a broad waiver from bureaucratic accountability requirements, a charter school must achieve specific performance outcomes documented in its contract. Theoretically, the district renews a charter’s contract if the school meets contractual goals and closes the school if it fails to meet goals.

The charter schools concept is credited to Ray Budde, a retired Professor at the University of Massachusetts and author of a 1988 paper titled “Education by Charter: Restructuring Schools Districts.”³⁰ The same year, Albert Shanker, then president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), also wrote about the charter concept in an influential piece in the *Peabody Journal of Education*.³¹ Joe Nathan and Ted Kolderie introduced the idea to Minnesota state legislators in the early 1990s, resulting in the first charter school legislation in 1991.³² The Center for Education Reform reports that as of September 2006, 40 states and Washington DC have charter school legislation, encouraging the creation of 4,100 schools serving 1.2 million children.³³

Charter school accountability varies dramatically across and even within states, although all charter schools are grounded on performance accountability—that is, certain consequences occur when a charter meets or fails to meet its performance objectives. However, market accountability is also embedded in charters, since they provide families with a choice outside the traditional public schools and so involve some competition. Theoretically, bureaucratic accountability is not a part of charter school accountability. Because charter schools rely on public tax dollars, however, they must comply with a number of local, state and federal standards and regulations even though some are waived. How strongly bureaucratic accountability is monitored varies tremendously among contexts. And finally, charter schools offer the potential for professional accountability as well. Shanker’s vision for charters included the vision of teachers holding one another to high standards of professional practice. Thus, it is conceivable that any charter might be subject to a variety of accountability models, with various models receiving varying degrees of emphasis.

Cyber/Virtual/Internet Schools

Clark defines a cyber school as an educational organization that offers K-12 courses through Internet or web-based methods.³⁴

[I]nstruction is delivered through...pre-packaged software programs, and teacher-directed distance learning or cyber learning where students receive either asynchronous or synchronous instruction via the Internet from a teacher or other instructor.³⁵

Although on-line learning is becoming a common component of the American K-12 education system, a comprehensive on-line school is a 21st century choice innovation. Cyber schools have emerged only in the last few years, and their magnitude is still very small. There are a few virtual schools operated by school districts or states, but cyber schools are primarily authorized as an innovative branch of the charter school model. Estimates of Internet-based charter schools in January 2007 indicate 173 cyber schools are operating in 18 states.³⁶

Even though the majority of cyber schools operate under a charter school agreement, the accountability mechanisms are less developed when compared with other reforms. At the inception of the virtual school reform, accountability expectations were almost exclusively market based. Market-based accountability remains the accountability type. However, bureaucratic regulations for virtual schools are being developed in Ohio, Colorado, Pennsylvania and California³⁷ (the states where this reform is maturing) due to financial scandals involving several virtual school operators. Unresolved issues remain regarding tracking student enrollment, monitoring instructional time, and developing fiscal accountability regulations.

Home Schooling

Isenberg reports that two separate issues drove the modern home-schooling movement, dating from its inception in the 1970s: concerns by religious parents about the moral standards of public schools and concerns by other parents about deteriorating academic standards.³⁸ The most current estimates by the National Center for Education Statistics put the number of home-schooled children at 1.1 million.³⁹ Every state allows home schooling; however, state regulations vary tremendously in such areas as procedures for parents to inform the state of their intent to home school, qualifications for parents, student participation in state testing, and student performance evaluations.⁴⁰ Rudner found the great majority of home-schooled students are at the elementary level and come from non-Hispanic white, married families with higher levels of income and formal education when compared to national averages.⁴¹ However, Weiner and Weiner, citing limitations in the data used by Rudner, argue home-schooled children are actually more diverse, ethnically and socio-economically, than traditional public school students.⁴²

In most states, accountability for home schooling is based almost entirely on market accountability, since it is driven primarily by parental dissatisfaction with other schooling options. Isenberg notes that home schooling has largely avoided bureaucratic accountability by actively opposing it: “fearing the possibility of state regulation, home-schooling interest groups succeeded not only in winning a legal status with minimal regulation but also in restricting the data

that could be collected about home-schoolers.”⁴³ The exceptions are the few states that require home school teachers to meet some basic requirements (a college degree, or state certification, for example), or that require home-schooled students to participate in statewide testing programs. Thus, bureaucratic, performance and professional accountability play a very minor role in accountability for children schooled at home.

Interdistrict Choice

Interdistrict choice plans offer options for students to attend public schools outside their home districts. Forty-two states have interdistrict choice policies.⁴⁴ Roughly 43% of the nation’s districts permit transfers out to another district and 46% allow transfers in.⁴⁵

Under interdistrict agreements, student participation is mostly voluntary. This stems from the 1974 Supreme Court decision in *Milliken v. Bradley*, which effectively stifled legally imposed, cross-district transfer programs. The two most common forms of interdistrict plans involve magnet schools and student transfer programs, which typically seek to encourage students to voluntarily move across district lines to reduce de facto racial segregation. Examples of the latter include Hartford’s Open Choice program, Boston’s Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) program, Rochester Urban-Suburban Interdistrict Transfer program, Milwaukee’s Chapter 220 Voluntary Student Transfer Program, and the Choice is Yours Program in Minneapolis.

Interdistrict arrangements are determined on a case-by-case basis. Because pupil spending varies across districts, interdistrict programs are always complicated by fiduciary considerations and responsibilities. For instance, under some plans, a portion of a district’s per-pupil funding follows the child; in other instances, such as some court-ordered desegregation plans, the state subsidizes a portion of the program’s expenditures, including transportation costs.

Interdistrict choice is influenced primarily by market accountability, although markets can run the gamut from controlled markets to laissez faire ones. Local conditions can vary widely between those extremes, but interdistrict choice is most commonly offered in a modestly regulated environment.

Intradistrict

Within-district school choice comes in many forms, with the two most common being specialty school programs and general open enrollment plans. Specialty school programs, also known as “non-neighborhood schools,” include alternative, technical, thematic, and magnet schools, among others. Students are not typically assigned to specialty schools based on their family residence, but instead follow an admissions process. Admission can be on a first-come, first-served basis, or through lottery. In some instances, admission depends upon performance-based criteria, as in an engineering or performing arts school that requires mathematical or artistic acuity. Some districts seek or require balanced

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racial compositions across their schools, thus making race an admissions consideration.⁴⁶

General open enrollment programs can occur at the entire district level (“choice districts”) or at the student level on a case-by-case basis (individual student transfers). *Choice districts* represent situations where parents and students are free to choose, or at least to apply to, all schools in a district. Cambridge, Mass., was one of the first districts to adopt this approach in 1981, followed by several other Massachusetts cities, Buffalo, N.Y., Montclair, N.J., Berkeley, Calif., and New York City’s formerly named District 4.⁴⁷ In many of these cases the districts are seeking racial redistribution and thus may regulate admission to the extent permitted by law. Such programs are often referred to as controlled-choice plans. *Individual student transfer* programs allow students to attend a school in their district other than their neighborhood-assigned or zone school. Districts with student transfer policies range in terms of their willingness to allow transfers; some districts openly endorse the policy while others reserve it for special situations only.

The number of students actively participating in open enrollment plans nationwide has been estimated around 4 to 5 million.⁴⁸ The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) choice option, although not explicitly limited as such, is a form of intradistrict school choice. It does not fall under the category of open enrollment, however, as only students in low-performing schools are eligible to transfer to another school.

In contrast to interdistrict forms of school choice, intradistrict plans tend to be more free-market based. Of the two basic intradistrict types, open enrollment relies more on market accountability; specialty schools, less so. For instance, magnet programs that are part of court-ordered or voluntary desegregation plans have some degree of bureaucratic accountability. Rules of admission, participation and resource allocation are part of the system. Even open enrollment policies, however, have some bureaucratic provisions, such as eligibility and transportation rules. Nonetheless, while “open enrollment” seldom is as open as it sounds, such policies are more viable within districts than across them.

School Choice Programs Across the Accountability Typology

Table 1 below summarizes and illustrates the relative emphasis each of the four accountability models on the various choice programs. Shading corresponds to degree of influence. The lighter the shade, the less evident or influential a particular accountability model; the darker the shade, the greater the influence. This is by no means an exact science to show the relationship between accountability types and school choice programs. The purpose of Table 1 is to provide a basis for continued reasoned conversation on school choice and accountability.

The analysis summarized in Table 1 suggests that vouchers/tax credits, charter schools, cyber schools and intradistrict plans are strongly influenced by market accountability.⁴⁹ Vouchers, cyber schools, and home schools are less influenced by performance accountability, at least as judged by today’s test-based

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accountability environment. It also appears that intradistrict, interdistrict, and charter plans invite the potential for the “most” accountability across the four types, and that home and cyber schooling invite the least. For the sake of comparison, traditional public schools appear as the last row in the table. Bureaucratic and performance accountability have much more influence in traditional publics than they do in nearly every choice option, while market accountability has significantly less influence. To be sure, prior to NCLB, traditional public schools did not get penalized in any meaningful way for students who did not learn, who dropped out, or both.

Table 1. The proposed relationship between types of accountability and school choice programs

<i>Choice Program</i>	Accountability Type			
	Bureaucratic Accountability	Performance Accountability	Market Accountability	Professional Accountability
<i>Vouchers/Tax Cr.</i>				
<i>Charters</i>				
<i>Cyber school</i>				
<i>Home school</i>				
<i>Interdistrict</i>				
<i>Intradistrict</i>				
<i>Trad. Public</i>				

	Strongly influential
	Influential
	Both influential and not influential
	Not influential

All school choice forms discussed above reflect the influences of market-type accountability, although in practice educational markets often operate in quasi-regulated markets and bureaucratic influences often emerge in specific choice plans. Regulated or quasi-regulated markets are in play for current voucher plans, tax credits, many charter schools, some cyber schools, and many intra- and interdistrict enrollment plans. Regulated markets include, for example, controlled choice plans or voluntary choice plans designed to create more equitable opportunities for racially isolated or economically disadvantaged students. Less regulated plans, such as certain open enrollment programs, mimic laissez-faire markets more closely. An important point here is that school vouchers as envisioned by Friedman remain a theoretical concept that has not yet been fully realized in practice. Nevertheless, regulated vouchers, even with their

participation and per-pupil funding restrictions, imply a degree of market accountability.

Accountability Constituents for School Choice Programs

All public schools have an obligation to our democracy and society writ large. The democratic entities that represent the greater polity include local governments, such as city councils and school boards, as well as state governments, such as legislative and executive branches and state agencies. Schools are also directly accountable to parents and the children who attend them. Table 2 illustrates how strongly each school choice model is accountable to its various constituents. Formal attempts to hold public schools accountable are done through these democratic entities, or constituents, which represent a particular citizenry. For instance, an elected school board is responsible for the quality of local schools and (in theory) represents the goals of its electing body.

Vouchers, charter schools, cyber schools and home schools offer strong accountability directly to the parents and children (consumers), consistent with their market-based orientations. In theory, charter schools are also directly accountable to their local governing boards, state governing boards, or both; in practice, however, the level of accountability appears to vary on a state-by-state basis. For instance, charter school boards in Arizona are designed to serve their immediate school community (parents and students) and do not represent citizens in any particular town or city. Inter- and intradistrict plans offer accountability to the state and local democratic entities, and to a lesser degree, families. Intradistrict plans offer the strongest accountability to local governing bodies that oversee them.

Table 2. School choice accountability strength by constituency

<i>Choice Program</i>	Accountability Constituency		
	Parent/child	State govt/ democratic entity	Local govt/ democratic entity
<i>Vouchers/Tax Cr.</i>	■	□	□
<i>Charters</i>	■	▒	▒
<i>Cyber school</i>	■	▒	□
<i>Home school</i>	■	□	□
<i>Interdistrict</i>	▒	■	▒
<i>Intradistrict</i>	▒	■	■

■ Strong accountability
 ▒ Moderate accountability
 □ Weak accountability

Two cautions apply to the judgments offered in Table 2. The first is that stakeholders with school choice experience may reasonably disagree with the assessments made based on their own experience. Because policies on any option

vary widely across and even within states, a strong generalization will not apply to every instance. The second is that the three constituents we identify only begin to encompass stakeholders in what we would refer to as “the greater public good.” Policy discussions should include a thorough exploration of how schools and school policies will advance accountability for greater societal goals.

Extending Notions of Accountability

At its core, accountability implies an obligation between debtor and debtee, between provider and constituent. It suggests that two parties enter a reciprocal relationship where a promised service is made in return for a payment of some type.⁵⁰ Bureaucratic, performance, and professional accountabilities all identify explicit criteria allowing for judgments about whether obligations have been met. School choice accountability presents a very different challenge. In the context of school choice accountability, payment can be construed as a student’s enrollment at a school (and the tuition dollars that follow); the measure of whether a school has met its service or educational obligations can be considered the level of parents’ satisfaction.

But this is only one way to look at accountability—as something imposed and assessed externally. Possibilities for accountability are not exhausted by the four models discussed here. For example, accountability can also be internal, as when teachers hold themselves accountable for students’ learning or well-being.⁵¹ In this case there is no external source holding teachers accountable. The distinction here is the difference between *being* accountable (internal) and being *held* accountable (external).

Moreover, accountability systems need not depend on the specific, explicit criteria required in bureaucratic, performance, and professional models. Instead, “goal-free” forms of accountability (to borrow a term from Michael Scriven’s theory on evaluation) involve no predetermined or mutually agreed upon performance goals. Accountability to markets and to parents are goal-free in the sense that goals are not explicit; rather, they are in the minds, preferences, and utility functions of families—in other words, consumers—who make choices. Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” dictates winners and losers in the educational marketplace while parents’ school-related goals for their children remain either tacit, undocumented or both.

Thus, although the accountability models discussed at length here wield widespread influence, policymakers are cautioned to remember that these four models do not exhaust the range of accountability possibilities. Not all accountability need be externally imposed; not all levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction can be neatly correlated to specific, explicitly articulated criteria.

Impact on Traditional Public Schools

Has school choice influenced the accountability of traditional public schools? Although causal claims are tenuous here, traditional public schools seem to have responded to the choice movement by offering or expanding their own

choice options. At the very least one can ask whether market forms of accountability are showing up more explicitly in traditional public schools. District open enrollment plans, theme or specialty schools, and entire “choice districts” such as Cambridge, Mass., offer examples where market accountability is manifest.

Charter schools were created to lessen the bureaucratic accountability on schools in exchange for increased emphasis on performance and market accountability. Some traditional district schools are reinventing themselves or emerging under similar conditions. Adaptations of traditional public schools such as Boston’s Pilot Schools, Oklahoma City’s Enterprise Schools, and Connecticut’s CommPACT Schools reveal charter-like characteristics, particularly with respect to their autonomous and deregulated environments. Yet on the whole, bureaucratic accountability remains strongly influential among traditional public schools.

Performance accountability is the strongest form of accountability currently operating in traditional public schools, yet it did not derive from the choice movement. This form of accountability emerged from federal and state mandates requiring performance-based accountability systems. The federal No Child Left Behind Act dramatically increased the emphasis on student test score performance for all types of public schools. Finally, the influence of professional accountability has remained fairly constant in the context of traditional public schools.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From a theoretical perspective, we have recommended elsewhere that multiple forms of accountability might collectively contribute to better educational accountability, all the while maintaining the “public” in our democratic schools.⁵² Following a five-year study of the Milwaukee voucher program, Van Dunk and Dickman suggested that the market-based program also had a “need for strict performance accountability...to allow choice to succeed in improving education.”⁵³ There is some agreement, then, that multiple forms might be productively combined. However, policymakers need to be aware as well that multiple accountability models can also undermine at least free-market accountability, as Kirp noted.⁵⁴ For instance, bureaucratic and performance accountability could compromise the logic underlying free-market voucher systems. Restricting voucher participation by certain criteria or to meet racial balancing requirements (bureaucratic accountability) closes the open market. Likewise, holding private schools accountable to state performance standards by way of state testing (performance accountability) could dissuade their participation in a voucher system.

Policymakers would be wise to keep in view the forest, and not overly focus on the trees. For instance the preceding few sentences might suggest an argument for relying solely on market accountability, devoid of bureaucratic and performance influences. But if the larger policy objective is to reduce inequities in

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educational opportunities, releasing bureaucratic oversights gives up significant leverage to represent those who may not be served well by the market.⁵⁵

Policymakers need to balance their concerns thoughtfully when creating an overall accountability system to ensure that its various components work in concert rather than in opposition to each other and that it attends to all constituents—parents and their children, of course, but also the taxpayer and society writ large. In sum, it is recommended that policymakers:

- Consider school accountability as something more than test performance or information for parents-as-consumers, the emphases reflected in the current prevalence of performance and market-based systems. Instead, shape accountability systems to examine whether schools are directly contributing to the greater societal good.
- When creating or judging school choice policies, consider local context. Choice policies and accountability systems vary widely across the US and from one community or locale to another.
- Consider employing different types of accountability at different levels and in different combinations to hedge risk. Accountability systems that rely on a single accountability mechanism are susceptible to inefficiencies or inequities.
- When evaluating accountability systems, rely on empirical research. Possible future studies investigating the effects of various combinations of accountability types may be particularly useful.

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